SCHOOL OF DIPLOMACY

How to Improve the Foreign Service

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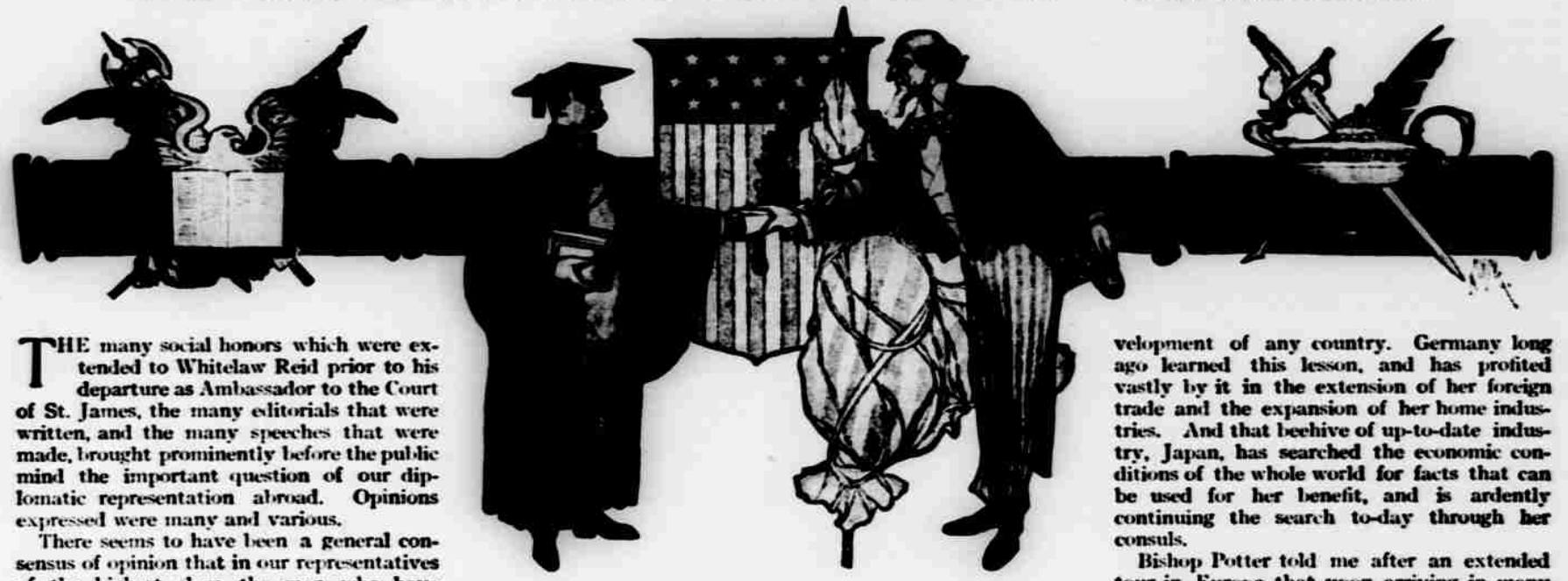

THE many social honors which were extended to Whitelaw Reid prior to his departure as Ambassador to the Court of St. James, the many editorials that were written, and the many speeches that were made, brought prominently before the public mind the important question of our diplomatic representation abroad. Opinions expressed were many and various.

There seems to have been a general consensus of opinion that in our representatives of the highest class, the men who have upheld our rights at Berlin, Paris and London, we are and ever have been most fortunate. Our ambassadors and ministers have been selected from a brilliant array of lawyers, literary men and scholars. They conceived their diplomatic responsibility in the highest way and brought to its fulfilment high culture, social refinement and broad experience of men in a manner that uniformly impressed the Governments to which they were accredited and reflected no little honor upon the Government from which they came. Such men as White, Lowell, Phelps, in broad scholarship, Choate, in command of the law, are admirable exemplars of the American people, of any people. Their high standing at home and the respect in which they have been held abroad in nearly all cases have fully justified their selection.

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But that even the best of them proved to be great diplomats cannot be said. Some brilliant victories have been scored by men like Adams and Cushing, but such achievements have been exceptional. Our diplomats who have distinguished themselves preeminently as diplomats are so few that they and their triumphs can be enumerated easily. But, as a class, our representatives at the great European capitals have been all that we might reasonably ask for, our ministers and ambassadors have been fully equal to the demand, equal in force and finesse to the representatives of other Governments against whom they have been matched. This is explained by the natural aptitude, if not genius, in many Americans which enables them without any special training to deal with new and grave responsibilities in an able and dignified way.

But in all those grades of diplomatic appointments which lie below the highest class, we as a nation are and have been far below that European standard which is the world's standard. This has arisen largely from our geographical isolation and the comparatively few international questions of high importance which have arisen in our history. Another influential cause has been the fact that we are a republic and strongly prejudiced in favor of what we call republican simplicity as compared with the form and the ceremony, the "fuss" and the "feathers," which are not only invariable but necessary concomitants of monarchy. Moreover, we never, until the Spanish War forced us into the position of an active world power, had been called upon to adjust the vast number of international questions, small and large, which are now our daily task. The fact is that just as the war with Spain found us greatly unprepared as a military nation, so the natural diplomatic results of that war have found us equally unprepared as a diplomatic nation, and we are confronted with as great a need for reform in our system of diplomacy as the need which was made evident to us for change in our system for the conduct of war.

Of our second-grade representation, in fact, little that is favorable can be said. It is generally unworthy of a great nation. The appointment to such a post is the cock-feather that is used to adorn a retired governor, representative or able political partisan. In most cases the consul-general or minor minister has never been outside of this country and knows nothing of the manners and customs of the people among whom fate and "The Administration" have placed him. He is ignorant of their language, and may, alas, have an exceedingly imperfect knowledge of his own. Of *savoir-faire* and *savoir-vivre* he has never heard. His assertion of his ideals of republican simplicity may not go so far as to make him seek nourishment through his knife at a public dinner or pick his teeth at a diplomatic table; but then again they may. The anecdotes of this kind are many and ludicrous, but they would be funnier if we were allowed to tell them against ourselves, instead of having to laugh at them when told by others. One's sense of humor in these cases is tempered by one's national pride, and like the Scotch we laugh with difficulty.

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One classic of this kind relates to one of our consuls-general at a European capital. Upon his arrival there he sought and found an official residence at the top of an apartment-house which had no elevator. The effete monarchy and the elevator are new acquaintances. The residence was selected with a careful eye on his salary rather than upon his diplomatic responsibility. Once installed there, he had a hundred cards handsomely printed, which not only bore his official title but even mentioned certain public honors conferred upon him by appreciative townsmen at home, and, as has been said, they were handsomely printed. He then sat down and wrote an official note to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, inclosing the cards. He said that he understood it to be customary that a newly arrived official in his position should formally call upon similarly accredited officials from other countries, but as he didn't know who they were he would be obliged if his excellency would send the cards to the proper addresses and explain the case.

Some of our consuls have done excellent and important work, which should not be overlooked and which is worthy of much praise. But as a class our consuls are of poor material; men who neither by instinct nor experience are fitted for such posts. Such places are bestowed as payment for political services and are sought and filled by men who are content with salaries of twelve to fifteen hundred dollars a year. And what sort of Americans must they be who will forego all chances of commercial, professional or political success for so paltry a sum and so brief a tenure of office? Are such men fit to represent such a nation as ours? They are rarely competent to send to Washington such commercial reports as can be relied upon. They are not equal to the only service whose proper performance would excuse their selection. And yet these consular reports are of the highest importance to the commercial progress and the industrial development of any country. Germany long ago learned this lesson, and has profited vastly by it in the extension of her foreign trade and the expansion of her home industries. And that beehive of up-to-date industry, Japan, has searched the economic conditions of the whole world for facts that can be used for her benefit, and is ardently continuing the search to-day through her consuls.

Bishop Potter told me after an extended tour in Europe that upon arriving in many places he sought the American consul in order to learn the places and facts of interest in the country roundabout, the official regulations to be obeyed, and such other information as was essential to a traveler. He often found the consul in a blank state of ignorance concerning the country, the customs and the people, and was driven to the local agency of a touring company to obtain the facts that he needed. The consul, he said, was usually a peevish and unhappy person, bitterly complaining of the hardship of life in an uncongenial land and—unfailing topic—the meagerness of his salary.

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The British and German consular services are models in every way. It is a *sine qua non* that their consuls shall know the languages of the countries to which they are sent. It is doubtful if our foreign appointees are asked regarding their acquaintance with any language. Comparatively few of them speak even French. We have had consuls at important Italian ports, such as Genoa or Naples, who retained their places through several administrations, but never developed sufficient talent or energy to acquire the most rudimentary comprehension of the tongue of the country. They were at the mercy of cheap, often illiterate, interpreters; their trade reports were compiled from second-hand information, filtered through the more or less opaque brains of their assistants. Such documents are worse than valueless to our manufacturers and agriculturists.

Every British consul on the continent is required to read and speak French and German, the languages in which nine-tenths of the commercial transactions are carried on. But we take a man from some far-inland town, a worthy citizen who never saw the sea, and locate him at a great seaport of Europe in the expectation that he will assist in the development of American trade. Can we be surprised that our foreign commerce is not what it should be, that Germany, for example, is crowding us out in many lines of goods in which we ought to lead because of the unrivaled excellence of American workmanship?

The average American consul does not understand the purpose for which he has been sent abroad. He appreciates the "honor," and swells up under it; but is neither alert, observing nor studious of our opportunities. Generally, he says that he isn't paid enough to "hustle."

These conditions are due entirely to the faults of our system, by which politics is allowed to overshadow competency. We must begin on new lines; we must train men to fill these posts, pay them better and insure them permanency and advancement, if they show ability and enthusiasm in their duties. In other words, we must inaugurate a training-school for future consular and diplomatic employees of the United States. We cannot hold our own with the better-equipped service of commercial and political rivals, unless we have the right kind of agents in all parts of the world.

I have already spoken about the British consular